

*Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale (2017)**Review Article**James Laidlaw*

Holbraad, M. and M. A. Pedersen 2017. *The ontological turn: an anthropological exposition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 352 pp Pb GBP 27.43 ISBN: 9781107503946.

News of this book has been circulating well in advance of its publication, and it has been widely and eagerly anticipated. The many anthropologists who have been enthused and excited, as well as those who have been provoked or mystified, by various earlier manifestations of 'the ontological turn' have looked forward to a comprehensive and authoritative statement of its principles and programme. This book certainly provides that, and gives a virtuoso performance in doing so. It positively bristles with enthusiasm, energy, and new ideas. It is engaging and inventive, spirited, combative, self-consciously contentious, and clearly driven by a restless, proselytising spirit, but it also sets out not just to dazzle with its conspicuous cleverness but also to persuade by serious argument. It succeeds in a good deal of what it sets out to do, and even those who are least convinced will be given a good deal to think about along the way. It ought to be widely read – really, anyone who thinks seriously about the nature of anthropology will want to read it – and it will certainly change the terms of debate. This it will do for several reasons, not least that its contents will come to so many as a surprise.

The prospect of nature being multiple, of the ethnographic record presenting us with multiple worlds of 'radical alterity' in places such as Amazonia, Melanesia, and northern Mongolia, each of which requires its own radically new concepts aligned with its radically other ontology: this was what many followers of 'the turn' have found most exciting and compelling. They are swiftly disabused of these fantasies in this book. From the outset, Holbraad and Pedersen are clear that this new updated version of the ontological turn makes no metaphysical claims. It is now a 'strictly methodological proposal' (p. ix), which may come as a shock to those who took away from *Thinking Through Things* (Henare, Holbraad, & Wastell 2007) the idea that 'epistemology' was little short of a human rights abuse. It is necessary, say Holbraad and Pedersen, to move on from debates around what they call the 'first wave' of manifestations of the turn, 'including some of our own writings'. Understandably, and on the whole justifiably, they do not dwell for long on just what in those earlier writings gave rise to such widespread 'misunderstandings' (although it may be going just a wee bit too far in self-exculpation to say that multiple worlds and plural ontologies were 'flirted with' [p. 156] in texts in which they occupied centre-stage theoretically, and often appeared in the titles). The important thing is that the revision be clear, and the new position understood. So Holbraad and Pedersen helpfully recommend that the word 'ontological' be used only adjectivally; 'never as a noun!' they almost shout from the page, and therefore never in the plural.

The concept of 'the ontological' is now to serve wholly as a signal that the question of what kind of theoretical vocabulary we use should remain resolutely open, and open specifically to influence from ethnographic data. It is a call to a special and demanding form of

intellectual self-discipline. The people, places, and ways of life we study can furnish us not only with objects but also with our *means* of enquiry, but only if we remain open to having our assumptions about what kinds of things there are in the world ('world' now once again in the singular), and therefore our concepts, transformed by what we learn from our ethnography. We do not already possess, in the form of so-called 'critical' social theory, a set of concepts that will always be adequate to describing what there is, and that will tell us what is 'really real' and what is illusory. As Holbraad and Pedersen concede – indeed they celebrate it – this is not entirely new because the history of anthropology is dotted with what they call 'ah ha! moments' when anthropological analysis has revealed hitherto unrecognised realities and aspects of social life. By radicalizing three long-established aspects of anthropological enquiry – reflexivity (being self-critical and open about the concepts we use), conceptualization (actively to create new concepts in response to challenges from the ethnographic data), and experimentation (including fieldworkers' willingness to experiment on themselves) – the new 'methodological' project for the ontological turn seeks to enable and actively pursue, and then to 'run with' and make the most intellectually of those 'ah-ha! moments'.

In the course of the book, I am described more than once as a critic – even as one of the 'most ardent critics' – of the original ontological turn. In fact, I have always found it to be a heady mixture of some highly stimulating and persuasive arguments, and others whose point, and in many cases connection to the good ideas, was rather elusive. It has therefore always been a project which I have wished to take seriously, in the sense of considering hard to what extent and in what ways it might be telling me something new and true and important. This new version is undoubtedly a marked improvement on the original, and insofar as the authors succeed in putting forward a 'purely methodological' programme it is a highly compelling one. However, I do not think they succeed entirely, and will therefore pay them the compliment of pointing out some of the places where I think they drift from the task they set themselves. Some of this is due to the extent to which their arguments are in fact, despite at least some of their intentions, affected by a set of specific (Heideggerian-cum-Deleuzian) metaphysical premises. And some of it is owing to the delirious tendency they avow of taking arguments to what they call (all on pp. 20-21, as if they were equivalent terms) 'their logical conclusion', 'their limits', and 'the extreme'. Even where this is less than persuasive, it is never other than engaging.

So how do Holbraad and Pedersen develop the argument for this new methodological version of the ontological turn? First comes a chapter in which they distinguish 'their' ontological turn from a number of other superficially similar perspectives. Then there are three chapters of close textual exposition of the three thinkers who have most profoundly influenced them, in reaching the views contained in this book. And finally, before a brief conclusion, there are two chapters in which they illustrate the merits of the new 'ontological' project and how it improves on earlier versions, and sketch a research agenda to take things forward.

The chapter distinguishing the new turn from other 'ontological' research programmes in and beyond anthropology ('speculative realism', Latour and his followers in Science and Technology Studies, anthropologists such as Michael Scott, Philippe Descola, and Tim

Ingold) is brilliantly done: the delineations of disagreements are crisp and sharp, but also courteous and fair minded.

The three expository chapters, respectively on Roy Wagner, Marilyn Strathern, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, are also each in their different way a *tour de force*. How interesting and compelling readers find them will depend in part on the extent to which they share the authors' sense of these thinkers as inspirational.

From Wagner's writings, they extract a call, 'to stage the encounter with ethnography as an experiment in conceptual reflexivity'. They could of course have got to that recommendation by a range of other more direct and less fanciful means, but for anyone seeking clarification about most of Wagner's corpus (they give up somewhat on the latest works, comforting themselves with the thought that they are not meant seriously), there will be much illumination here.

From Strathern, they take first an account of why the concept of the relation is so central and generative for anthropology, and further the methodological principle of taking any given subject matter *as* a field of relations. They handle with some deftness the delicate challenge arising from the fact that Strathern herself has, with exquisite politeness but none the less pointedly, described her project as 'epistemological' when of course they would like it to be ontological. In the end, they are forced to concede that it merely 'has inherently "ontological" implications', and that too only if by 'ontological' we mean something that no one has hitherto thought implied by the word 'ontological', namely 'conceptual reflexivity and experimentation'. But the fact that Strathern herself may not have followed Holbraad and Pedersen all the way on their own trajectory does not of course diminish or invalidate the direction they take her ideas. The originality and sheer virtuosity of what they do with those ideas are strikingly impressive.

The chapter on Viveiros de Castro is rather more tortured than the other two, because it was from him that the 'first wave' of the movement got its original commitment to multiple ontologies, and while Holbraad and Pedersen now wish to drop that as 'preposterously reifying' their continued inspiration and devotion is clearly very strong. So, this chapter consists of a series of highly creative attempts at reinterpretation. Some of Viveiros de Castro's recent writings help them a little, but not very much, and in my own view their slightly desperate-sounding insistence that his approach 'amounts to *anything* but the kind of exoticizing essentialism with which his critics so often charge him' (p. 160, emphasis in the original) fails to convince. Viveiros de Castro is a brilliant and creative anthropologist, from which almost everyone, myself included, has learned a very great deal. But I do not think, as Holbraad and Pedersen try to suggest, that his frequent appeal to Deleuze as a philosophical authority can be explained either by Deleuze having really got his ideas from 'Amazonian, Melanesian, and other indigenous sources' (his notoriously careless pillaging of anthropological writings cannot warrant this), or as a political strategy to recruit Deleuze retrospectively as a 'comrade in arms'. If the latter is the case, then let us hope that Deleuze offers better support from beyond the grave to Amazonian indigenous rights than he offered in life to dissidents in Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe. I do not think the sense Viveiros de Castro gives to the expression 'taking seriously' (directly applying an argument from Deleuze) is a helpful reference point for anthropology, and in particular it does not

amount, as Holbraad and Pedersen's section title suggests, to taking the *people* in question seriously. I do not think the idea, again, taken from Deleuze, of 'multiplying the world' makes any more sense than that of multiple worlds. And I do not think Viveiros de Castro's wish to promote 'the ontological self-determination of the world's peoples' can really be made compatible with a strictly methodological programme, however radically the meanings of 'self-determination', 'peoples', and 'world' are each redefined, and even if, as in Holbraad and Pedersen's commentary, 'conceptual' is conveniently substituted in place of 'ontological'.

In general, Holbraad and Pedersen's task throughout this book would have been a good deal easier, one feels, if they could have dropped the label 'ontological' entirely, and instead used one of the ideas for which this book shows infinitely more confident enthusiasm: why not the 'reflexive', 'experimental', or 'conceptual turn'? But I guess it was just too later for that. In any case, the authors are surely to be commended for their intellectual boldness and flexibility, in revising their views to the extent that they have.

Most readers might expect that when Holbraad and Pedersen move on in the next two chapters to demonstrate what their proposed new methodology means in practice, that they will provide a discussion of some of the lengthy list (on p. 8) of recent substantive ethnographic works that 'adopt an ontological approach'. I'm not at all sure that all the authors cited would be equally happy to accept this appellation, and confident that several would have doubts about the version presented here. But it is an impressive list and would certainly form the basis for an attractive advertisement for the 'turn', but instead they choose to illustrate how Mark-I ontological-turn analysis can be improved into Mark II by describing how their own respective contributions to *Thinking Through Things* would be revised. The discussion they present is creative and highly interesting, although its force, for me, is weakened by the fact that what they declare to be the driving motivation behind their chapters, in both the original and the revised versions, is left so radically unexplained. They say they want to undermine a 'humanist' distinction between persons and things, and to 'enhance the status of things' in what they repeatedly refer to as 'the conceptual economy of anthropological analysis', by showing how, 'suitably reconceived', things can 'radiate light of their own' or 'invent' their own conceptualization. It is suggested that this will contribute to undermining what Latour calls 'the Modern constitution', the distinction said to be essential to modernity (and only that?) between the material and non-material. So the way they propose to improve on their original analyses is that in addition to attending to what people say about and do with the things in question, they as anthropologists should pay attention to the phenomenology of one's encounter with the things themselves ('what we hear, see, smell, taste and touch of the thing as we find it'). If not quite a radical departure for anthropology as such, this certainly constitutes a revision of the heavily discursive analyses provided in *Thinking Through Things*. What is missing (perhaps they do genuinely take it to be self-evident, in light of the current fashion for post-humanism) is why this objective should be considered desirable in itself, intrinsic to the anthropological project, or implied by their methodological version of it: on the face of it, these are exactly the sort of metaphysical claims from which they elsewhere claim to refrain. I'm sure many anthropologists will be open to persuasion on these points, if arguments for them are made, but they do need to be made. It is also left unsaid whether things still go about reinventing themselves when no anthropologist is looking.

The second way in which this book suggests a future for the ontological turn is in rising to the challenge of addressing ethnography that is not of places which the earlier version described as having 'other ontologies', and also phenomena that are not readily captured by a stress on relationality. The example Holbraad and Pedersen choose is conversion to Christianity. Like the previous chapter, this one is brimming with new ideas. The one that caught my attention most takes off from the familiar observation that Christian converts often sever relations with kin and others. Holbraad and Pedersen ask the slightly unexpected question: where do those relations go? They observe, as again have many others, that such people also often self-consciously develop new relations with themselves: practices of self-cultivation such as confession, and so on. The new idea here is not, as Holbraad and Pedersen claim, that of a 'self-relational individual', as they put it. That idea is well established, not least from having been rather elaborately developed by Foucault in the later volumes of the *History of Sexuality* and elsewhere. What is new is the suggestion that this interior elaboration is *caused* by the folding inwards of the relationality that formerly was expressed externally, in relations with others. The warrant they give for this they take from Strathern, and her point that at whatever scale observation is conducted (from galaxies to sub-atomic particles, by way of 'global structures' and 'local communities'), observers will find the same order of information, and this will sustain the same degree of complexity in conceptualisation. But this idea, which I have always taken to be an observation *about the activity of observing* (indeed about specific practices of observing), is here interpreted as a kind of law of conservation of relations: those that have disappeared between individuals must have gone somewhere, and this explains the 'swelling' of the individual with interiorized relations. This is an intriguing and attractive idea, although I can see no reason why it should be true, nor any sense in which Strathern provides authority for it. But I can see that it is a potentially very fruitful suggestion in terms of raising fascinating questions for ethnographic research, and a new way of thinking about individualism.

This book could be read overall in at least two ways. First, it might be taken as a comprehensive prospectus for anthropology: a set of rules for what anthropologists should and shouldn't do and criteria of excellence for anthropological analysis. But read this way it would be not at all satisfactory. There is no discussion of how the conceptual innovation it encourages might relate to anything we might call 'theory' or what scope there might be for explanation of any kind. How would this kind of anthropology comport with historical knowledge, regional traditions of scholarship, or other disciplines? At the most basic level, should we expect that a concept generated as they suggest in one ethnographic encounter will prove itself in use beyond its original context, however that is to be defined? The idiom of experimentation runs throughout the book. At one point the authors suggest that success for the whole procedure should be measured by, 'the degree to which potentially useful concepts have been generated by this heuristic procedure, and more generally the extent to which this ontological experiment has explicated, problematized and improved existing ways of thinking' (p. 23), but there is no discussion of criteria of experimental design (what differentiates a good from a bad experiment?), or of how the results of an experiment are to be assessed (what might count as 'useful'?). If we have no such criteria, then we are not really conducting experiments, and talk of 'heuristics' is a bit of a cop out; we are just trying out something new and seeing if we like it.

There are points at which the book seems to suggest that it be read this way. So for instance, in the course of their discussion of Viveiros de Castro's idea of 'ontological self-determination', Holbraad and Pedersen suggest that anthropology should reject the task of describing and interpreting the world as it is: a world of nation states, institutions, unequal distribution of power, etc. Instead, they suggest that we should be in the business of 'imagining and conceptually elaborating ethnographically motivated alternatives' to the world as it is (p. 196). But making sense of this proposal – distinguishing it from the kind of romantic fantasy anyone might go in for – requires spelling out what 'ethnographically motivated' might mean, and that has got to require standards of faithful description of the world as it actually is – nation states, institutions, inequality, and all. We should indeed be open, as Holbraad and Pedersen rightly say, to learning from our informants that there are things in the world we formerly didn't know about, to having our ontological assumptions revised and developing new concepts in response. But this stance is weakened rather than strengthened when they gloss it by saying not that we might hope to learn that things are actually other than we thought, but merely that they 'could be otherwise' (p. 68). 'I discovered radical alterity and it made me dream a dream', is not the basis of a scholarly discipline. And indeed, the most striking images they use for anthropological enquiry are of artistic performance, in which all the stress is on novelty and virtuosity. At one point (following Wagner) they liken it to jazz improvisation, and call for, 'an anthropology of solos, or even anthropology *as* solos' (p. 69, emphasis in the original); at another it is a sort of conceptual art in reverse, 'producing conceptualizations that express in abstract form a set of concrete realities' (p. 241). All in all, the idea they suggested to me was of a variety show, with one virtuoso performance after another, each demonstrating their individuality and flair, but with no necessary relation with each other, no *implications* of one for any other, and no sense of cumulative endeavour. And if their formula of reflexivity, conceptualization, and experimentation were taken to be a sufficient blue-print for anthropology as a whole, this is all it could be.

But for much of the time, the book admits of a different and much more satisfying reading: not as a comprehensive prescription for the discipline, but as a recipe very specifically for generating those 'a-ha! moments'. And although from one point of view that is rather a limited aspect of anthropology, it is very far from being trivial. Indeed, I think the claim the authors presuppose, that it is in some ways essential to the discipline, has a good deal to be said for it. It isn't our exclusive preserve – for many kinds of historians too it is of the essence – but there are reasons why such historians so often look to anthropology for ideas about how to address the challenges they face. Holbraad and Pedersen's programme makes best sense, then, as the most sustained and concerted, most self-consciously radical and fundamental rethinking of this defining aspect of the discipline. It is a relentlessly intellectual, single-minded, in some ways strikingly ascetic programme – ignore a lot else and focus on this extremely demanding challenge of putting your ethnographic data before your own certainties – whether derived from your preferred social theory or from common sense. 'The ultimate goal of the ontological turn is to take the things that people in the field say, do or use, so seriously that they trump all metaphysical claims made by any political, religious or academic authority, including (and this is where things become both tricky and interesting) the authority that we assume in making *this* very claim' (p. 287). Actually, things become tricky and interesting much earlier than that (what if the people in the field *are* political, religious, or academic authorities?; how many different such things can we take

seriously at the same time?) and therefore long before it is taken to this (logical?, limit?, extreme?) point, at which it becomes self-confuting, it is a highly productive goal for anthropologists to set themselves.

This is a remarkable book, and every intellectually serious anthropologist will find it a challenging and thought-provoking read. Only a minority, I think, will be convinced by everything they find in it, and there are other ways than those recommended here to respond to some of the challenges it raises, but still fewer serious readers, I think, will be entirely unaffected. It is a book that deserves to and probably will have a deep impact on how anthropologists go about their business.

Reference

Henare, Amira, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell (eds.), *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*. London: Routledge.

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